

RECONSTRUCTING THE VERNACULAR: PALESTINIAN URBAN LIFE VS. THE "ARAB VILLAGE"

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Abstract

The tension between modernity and tradition has played a major role in the subjugation of the Palestinian populations of Israel. It has confirmed the State of Israel's insistence that their backwardness renders them unfit for serious dialogue with a modern western state. The "Arab village" is the spatial representation of this attitude, the embodiment of a traditional and underdeveloped *modus vivendi* (Eyal, 2003). Its vernacular pattern presents a negative rural tradition of backwardness deriving from Palestinian submissiveness (Rosenfeld, 1964; Lustick, 1985). The Palestinians themselves, however, tend to romanticize their past by imagining it mainly within a framework of village life (Hasan, 2005; Tamari, 2007).

Within this context of city/modernity vs. village/tradition, the paper examines current Israeli Palestinians' claims to the city as translated into new urban forms and politics. It focuses on the differences between emerging urban vernacular and its potential challenge to the discourse and political practices of the Arab village. The paper examines the re-establishment of Arab urban life in an area of Haifa built by the German Templers at the end of the 19th century and recently renovated. The German Colony lies along a main north-south artery which is still an important axis linking the

sea on one side with Mount Carmel on the other via the newly rehabilitated Bahai Gardens. After many years of inertia, Haifa Municipality began restoring the area in the late 1990s during the euphoric days following the Oslo Accord, the aim being to attract tourists. The project, funded by the Ministry of Tourism and fueled by the newly developed Bahai Gardens, consisted mainly of restoring the public infrastructure in the expectation of attracting private investors. Following the Palestinian Intifadas and the escalation of terrorist attacks, the project, almost completed, was about to collapse, but little by little new bars and restaurants were opened by local Arab investors. This new urban area has attracted Arab and Jewish Israelis from all over the country, and has become a major place of leisure for the Palestinian of Haifa and the northern region of Israel.

The paper discusses the German Colony vis-à-vis the adjacent Wadi Nisnas investigates the adaptation of vernacular form to new cultural meaning through the emergence of new forms and practices that re-establish Palestinian urban life. It examines the continuity/discontinuity of traditions, their role in creating a vernacular in the midst of a modern city, and how they give new meaning and authenticity to

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ethno-national aspirations.

Keywords: Constructed vernacular, Urban life,
Arab village, Israeli Palestinians, Haifa

Introduction



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Figure 1: Wadi Nisnas neighborhood



Figure 2: The market in Wadi Nisnas

Introduction

Wadi Nisnas, the focus of Arab¹ life in Haifa, offers an unmediated encounter with the putative “Arab village”. The area was developed at the end of the 19th century, during Ottoman rule, as a Christian neighborhood outside the walled city of Haifa. In the aftermath of the 1948 war, Wadi Nisnas and its immediate surroundings became the core of Haifa’s Palestinian community, Christian and Muslims alike, providing them with education, religious, and other civic and cultural services. The neighborhood is characterized by mixed land use, with a rich diversity of businesses and commerce. As the only Palestinian neighborhood in Haifa where buildings and infrastructure were not destroyed during or after the 1948 war, it represents a quasi-authentic Palestinian physical fabric. Its “Arabism” is a source of pride for the inhabitants who did not leave Haifa in 1948. But for the municipality it is also a means of emphasizing Haifa’s uniqueness as a ‘mixed city’. Especially during the Holiday of Holidays Festival, the narrow winding alleys and stone buildings are used to present the neighborhood as “other” (Figures 1 and 2).

The adjacent German Colony is currently

developing as the centre of Arab leisure and nightlife. The area was built in the 19th century by the German Templers as a model agricultural community. Its main north-south artery is an important axis linking the sea to Mount Carmel via the newly rehabilitated Bahai Gardens. After many years of inertia, Haifa Municipality began restoring the area in the late 1990s with funds from the Ministry of Tourism fuelled by the newly developed Bahai Gardens. The aim was to attract the forthcoming millennium tourists. With the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifadas and the escalation of terrorist attacks, the project, almost completed, was about to collapse. However, against all planning provisions it has become a major leisure place for the Palestinians of Haifa and the northern region of Israel, representing a revival of Palestinian urbanity (Figures 3 and 4).

This inversion, in which a Palestinian urban neighborhood represents an “Arab village”, while a previously European agriculture settlement becomes the centre of a flourishing Palestinian urban culture, suggests the potential of the built form to uphold transformation of content and meaning. This paper asks about the continuity of the vernacular in the face of disruption and of tradition. Within the contested environment of

¹The term ‘Arabs’, as used in the Israeli discourse, refers to the Palestinians who stayed within the borders of the State after its creation in 1948 (including Muslims, Christians, Druze and Bedouins). They are citizens of the state of Israel who belong to the Arab culture. This paper focuses on Arabs Muslims and Christians of the North and uses ‘Arab’



Figure 3: German Colony north-south axis linking the sea to Mount Carmel via the Bahai Gardens



Figure 4: Café in the German Colony

Israel/Palestine, it wonders about the ability of the built form to uphold the cultural meaning and authenticity that sustain ethno-national aspirations.

Background

The tension between modernity and tradition has played a major role in the subjugation of the Palestinian populations of Israel. It has confirmed the State of Israel's insistence that the Palestinians' backwardness renders them unfitted for serious dialogue with a modern western state (Kimmerling, 2008). The "Arab village" is the spatial representation of this attitude, the embodiment of a traditional and underdeveloped modus vivendi (Eyal, 1993). Its vernacular pattern presents a negative rural tradition of backwardness of the "other", deriving from governmental control and Palestinian submissiveness alike. As Rosenfeld (1969) and Lustick (1984) show, the Israeli Government has maintained the traditional Palestinian societal structure for its own political purposes. However, preserved and

reinforced traditional values have supported community elders against social transformations that undermine their own authority (Hasan, 2002).

Official policies of land separation, including the establishment of purely Jewish settlements, restrictions on land administered by Arab municipalities, discrimination in housing subsidies and financial assistance, and lack of planned public housing have all limited freedom of choice of residency for Israeli Palestinians and emphasized their rural living patterns (Khamaisi, 1990; Kimmerling and Migdal, 2003). For the most part, they have been left to solve their own problems, under the assumption that their private land was not used efficiently due to their preference for low density and rural building patterns. The limitations on housing choice and of varied living options are also thought to be due to lack of private transactions, deriving from social mores and political attitudes regarding land (Yiftachel, 2000).

These limitations were a prime factor in creating what Meyer-Brodnitz (1969) has described as 'latent urbanization', in which the Arab population undergone urbanization within the context of existing villages, and not

as a result of migration from villages to towns. Falah (1989) explained the lack of Arab rural-to-urban migration as a governmental strategy attempting to achieve a positive Jewish demographic balance and to disrupt the territorial continuity of Arab lands and settlements. This, he contends, has served to strengthen the rootedness of the population in their villages and as an obstacle to migration. Such urban phenomena have, to date, been associated with the internal processes of Arab villages, their physical, architectural, social, demographic and functional structures, and changes within the settlements (Rosenfeld and Carmi, 1977; Schnell, 1980). Less has been written about Palestinians city-dwellers in Israel and the continuity/discontinuity of their urbanity.

Rabinowitz and Monterescu (2008) describe the processes by which Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre, the three towns that in the 19th century evolved into proto-national, mercantile mixed towns, have permitted partial rehabilitation of Palestinian urbanity. Focusing on mixed Arab and Jewish cities in Palestine (and later Israel) in the 19th and 20th centuries, they indicate the significant links between modernity, the concept of the nation, and urbanity. They explore a border zone where politically constructed ethno-territorial rival groups compete, but also where individuals and institutions on both sides often co-operate, seeking personal gain, communal perpetuation, and resistance to colonial and state power. They ask questions about how Palestinian urbanity is formed and developed in Israel, especially in relation to urban form and culture.

Manar Hasan (2005) notes the absence of the city from the spaces and social structures of

the Palestinian community in Israel post-1948, and the process that has erased it from Palestinian and Israeli memories alike.

She claims that uprooting the Palestinian city brought about the extirpation of national memory from the Palestinian population remaining in Israel, i.e. not only the Palestinians went to exile, but also their memory. However, the village and its collective memory rooted in the locale have survived. Hence the village rather than the city has remained in the memory, an object of yearning and contact with the past (Hasan, 2005, p. 202). The centrality of the village in the Palestinian imagination also explains the Palestinians' focus on land in their national struggle for liberation (Ibid, p. 203). Tamari (2007) suggests that Palestinians tend to romanticize their past by imagining it mainly within a framework of village life. Azmi Bishara (1999), Ahmad Sa'di (1997) and others have also criticized the Palestinian reliance on traditional values, although they tend to discuss this in post-colonial terms - as an acceptance of the oppressor's views by the oppressed. Hasan (2002), more blatantly, accuses Palestinian society of returning to traditional values and thereby strengthening patriarchal norms in a manner that has severely affected women.

Today, Israeli Palestinians' claims to the city are manifested as new urban and political forms. An emerging Palestinian urban culture challenges both Israeli discourse and political manipulations of the "Arab village" and the Palestinians' own yearning for the village. This offers new possibilities for imagining, or re-imagining, a thriving Palestinian community that redefines its destiny by re-thinking the urban space and employing dynamic tactics to reconstruct a vernacular for the future.

Haifa is considered as the only city in Israel where Arabs and Jews maintain some sort of coexistence. Within the context of city/modernity vs. village/tradition, I examine the adaptation of vernacular form to a new cultural meaning that defines the re-emergence of Arab urban life. Palestinian claims to the city are explored within a framework of tradition and its role in constructing a vernacular in the midst of a modern city. This is an attempt to understand how those claims are translated into urban politics and practices, and how they give new meaning and authenticity to ethno-national aspirations.

As an activist, I am interested in how urban communities maintain their identity and integrity in the face of local, national and supra-national powers. As an architect and planner, my concern is the potential of the city to contain and accommodate urban life. The trajectories of Wadi Nisnas and the German Colony, as they change and transform their meanings in the city, are indications of the power of place to produce and reproduce traditions.

Palestinian urbanity and the challenge of the "Arab Village"

Palestinian and Jewish Israelis tend to live in separate settlements and towns. The only Israeli cities considered 'mixed' - Haifa, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, Lydda, Ramla, Acre, Upper Nazareth and Jerusalem (which should

probably be treated as a category in its own right) - although accounting for a mere 9% of the total Arab population in Israel, are the only shared Arab-Jewish spaces in the country (Falah et al., 2000). As Goren (2008) indicates, the term 'mixed city', was coined during the British Mandate in Palestine. But since 1948 the term has been used to denote situations in which Jewish and Arab communities are under the same urban jurisdiction.

As to whether Haifa, with 30,000 Arab residents, just under 10% of the city's total population (the rest being mostly Jewish)², is in fact a mixed city, is open to question (Kallus and Kolodney, forthcoming). Jews and Arabs have lived in Haifa under the same municipality since the early 20th century. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 the Palestinian community remaining in the city has become a marginalized minority (Segev, 1984). These events have given rise to doubts as to whether Haifa is a "mixed", "ethnically fractured" or "ethno-nationally contested" city (Leibovitz, 2007). Nonetheless, for many Palestinians, especially for Haifa's residents, the history of Haifa is a lived daily experience, and an important aspect of their identity (Habibi, 1993; Kanafani, 2001). Moreover, the continuity of Palestinian residence in the city represents ethno-national aspirations. It embodies the city as a collective symbol of united national memory against the local memory of the village (Hasan, 2005).

Can a lost urban tradition be restructured? Can it be reinvented in an existing urban form and thus become a new vernacular? Let us consider Wadi Nisnas and the German Colony, two neighborhoods located in the midst of the city of Haifa, and examine their different and

²About 55% of the Arabs living in Haifa are Christians. The other 45% are mainly Moslems (City of Haifa, 2006)

complementary struggles to maintain Palestinian urbanity in an Israeli city.

Top-down imposition of a Palestinian vernacular

Wadi Nisnas is the only Palestinian neighborhood in Haifa where the buildings and infrastructure were not destroyed during or after the 1948 war. Despite population changes, the physical fabric of the neighborhood has remained fairly intact, and currently represents a quasi-authentic Palestinian urbanism. The area was developed at the end of the 19th century as a modern Christian neighborhood outside the walls of Haifa to accommodate Arab labourers from the surrounding area. Neighborhoods in Haifa were developed according to religious affiliation, encouraged by the Ottoman Government that ruled Palestine until 1918, and by the British Mandate that followed (Goren, 2006). In the socio-geographic pattern thus created, Christian neighborhoods were established to the west of the Old City, Muslims to the east, and the Jewish community settled on the lower slopes of Mount Carmel to the south (Goren, 2006)³. Before and during the 1948 war some 65,000 Arabs left Haifa. The remaining 5,000 Arabs, Christians and Muslims alike, were concentrated by the Israeli authorities in Wadi Nisnas and its immediate surroundings (Morris, 1991, p.107). The order, issued by the commander of the occupied city on July 1st 1948, allowed five days for completing the transfer of all Arabs from the Carmel and other

mixed neighborhoods to houses evacuated by refugees from Wadi Nisnas (Segev, 1984, pp. 69-70). After the war, the Wadi was designated as the permanent location for the transferred population by the Committee for Housing Arabs, which was responsible for arranging long-term housing for Arabs who had been relocated during the war (Goren, 2006). Wadi Nisnas thus became the centre of Haifa's Palestinian community, providing that community (including those living in other parts of the town) with education, religious, and other civic and cultural services. Wadi Nisnas has a very mixed character, with a rich diversity of businesses and commerce, a lively market, and many public buildings including schools, kindergartens, clubs and churches. Many public societies and NGOs operate in the area, as well as iconic cultural landmarks such as the Al-Midan Theatre, the Arab newspaper Al Ittihad published since 1944, and the Arab-Jewish centre, Beit HaGefen, established in 1963 by the municipality. The neighborhood is densely built with a homogeneous urban morphology characterized by the narrow winding streets and steps of the sloping terrain (see Figures 5 and 6). The layout and physical attributes distinguish it from its surroundings, and the topography offers views from and into the neighborhood, allowing for definition of its perimeters. This concentration of a Palestinian population in a clearly defined area within the urban fabric has consolidated a community that is intimate and well established, not only because of its traditional *modus vivendi*, but also because the Palestinian population of Haifa has had few opportunities of expanding beyond its boundaries (ASP, 2006). Over-population and the resultant congestion,

³Two municipal institutions, "Committee for Arabs" and "Committee for normalization", were responsible for Arab residents in Haifa following the 1948 war (Segev, 1984:71).



Figure 5: Huri Street in Wadi Nisnas

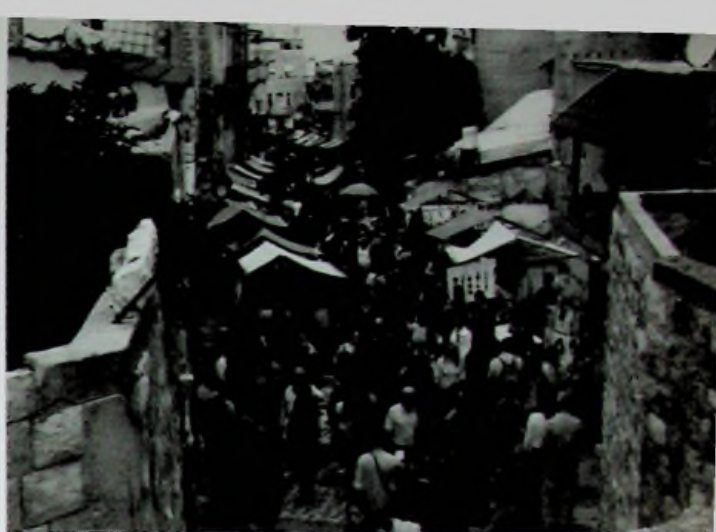


Figure 6: Visitors in Wadi during the Holiday of Holiday festival

neglect and deterioration of the infrastructure and lack of new development have caused the neighborhood to decline. A survey made in 1995 indicated that the buildings are in poor condition, and there is a chronic shortage of public spaces, those that do exist being well below the standard criteria (Amidar, 1995). The results of the 1995 national census ranked Wadi Nisnas in cluster 6, an indication of its poor socio-economic condition and standard of living⁴. Over the years there has been little private investment in the neighborhood due to lack of land and a low owner rate. More than half of the buildings in the Wadi are “abandoned properties”, i.e. belonging to Palestinian refugees who did not reclaim them after the 1948 war. Hence they officially belong to the Israel Land Authority, and are managed by the government’s housing company Amidar⁵.

In 1976 Wadi Nisnas was designated for rehabilitation by the Ministry of Housing and Construction and included in the National Renewal Project. The intention was to initiate social and economic change in selected

neighborhoods through improvement of housing and the urban infrastructure, and through investment in programmes for education, health and employment (Elazar and Marom, 1992). Most of the neighborhoods selected for the project were government housing estates originally built for Jewish immigrants – low-standard dwellings for socially disadvantaged populations. Wadi Nisnas was an exception. Beyond recognition of its condition, the choice was intended to demonstrate equality in distribution of government funds. It allowed extensive repairs of the infrastructure - sewers, drainage, and road systems. But no funds were made available for improving personal standards of living. Hence the neighborhood has retained its “Arab-ness”.

The uniqueness of the Wadi derives from its actual and symbolic ongoing existence in the midst of an ethno-national conflict. Its physical preservation as an Arab site, together with its inhabitants, is a demonstration of Palestinian identity in an ethno-nationally contested city. Its “Arabism” emphasizes the uniqueness of

⁴ This ranking ranged from 1 (lowest) to 20 (highest). For comparison, Neve David, an immigrants’ neighborhood built in the 1950s, is ranked at the same level as Wadi Nisnas, while Carmelia, on Mount Carmel, is ranked at 19 (Haifa Municipality, 2006a)

⁵ According to Israeli law, any property left unoccupied after November 29, 1947 became “abandoned property”. The Government Custodian is authorized to develop this property through the Development Authority, a legal body established in 1951 and used by the Israel Land Authority to oversee these properties. Abandoned properties were sold to the Development Authority by the Government Custodian to cover ongoing expenses. Accrued funds are to be used after peace is established to cover both the refugees’ needs and compensation to the Jews who left Arab countries for the properties they left behind.

Haifa as a 'mixed city', endowing the city with a relative advantage in the conflicted Israeli space, where its "normality" is emphasized against the homogeneously "white" city of Tel Aviv and the ostensibly "united", but actually painfully divided, city of Jerusalem.

This strategy, employed by the municipality especially during the Holiday of Holidays festival, is intended to attract tourists to the Wadi and into the rest of the city. Preserving the Wadi as an "Arab-village" neighborhood is a marketing strategy – Haifa as a mixed city in which a Palestinian population maintains its traditional way of life - reinforcing the image of the city as a site of Arab-Jewish coexistence. Preserving the Wadi's Arab-ness presents Haifa as more progressive than other Israeli cities, as a city of coexistence (Kallus and Kolodney, forthcoming).

The German Colony – spontaneous bottom-up revival of Palestinian urbanity

The German Colony was built by the Templers

at the end of the 19th century outside the city wall of Haifa. This fundamentalist religious group drifted away from the Lutheran church and believed that living in the Holy Land would hasten the second coming of Christ. The Haifa colony was the first of several established in the Holy Land - near Jaffa, in Galilee, and in Jerusalem. The Templers employed up-to-date farming methods, and introduced local industries that brought modernity to Palestine, which had long been neglected by the Ottomans. They imported agricultural machinery and engaged in "mixed farming," combining dairy farming and field crops, used soil fertilizers, better methods of crop rotation, and raised new crops such as potatoes. Registering the land was problematic however, due to back taxes and local boundary disputes, so they gradually abandoned farming in favour of industry and tourism, building hotels, opening workshops, and establishing an olive-oil soap factory. By the end of the Ottoman era the colony had 750 inhabitants, 150 dwellings, and dozens of businesses.

The Templers adhered to strict planning principles. Their homes lined the long main boulevard, about 35 metres wide, which ran from north to south, dividing the settlement into eastern and western parts. Each part was again divided by a 12-metre-wide street, and



Figure 7: the German Colony neighborhood in 1906

(source: a postcard from the Rimon collection)

6-metre-wide alleys connected all streets. Single-family homes for farmers and artisans, each on a separate plot and with gardens in the rear, lined the main boulevard. Vineyards were planted at the top of the mountain slope, stretching from the dwellings to the present-day Bahai complex.

Hotels, a factory, shops and enterprises were all built at the intersection of the main avenue (now Ben-Gurion Avenue) and Jaffa Road, which runs parallel to the coastline (Fig. 7).

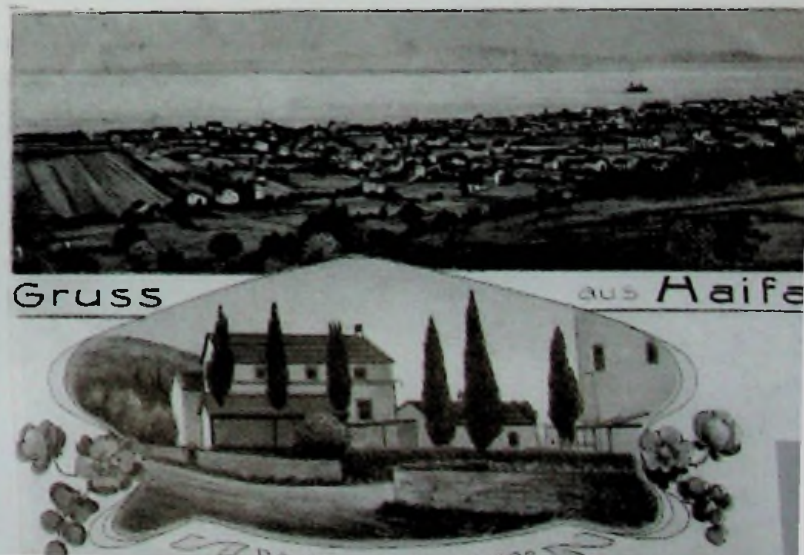
A typical Templar structure consisted of three levels. The basement, half of which was sunk in the ground, served as an area for storing water and provisions. From ground level a few steps led up to the kitchen, dining-room and central living room. The upper level was occasionally protected by a tiled roof, and contained the sleeping quarters and guest rooms. The sloping roofs are timber and tile constructions, though the Templars initially followed the local practice of constructing the flat roofs that prevailed throughout the Middle East. The eaves were embellished with stonework that concealed the drainpipes. The houses had gardens with sunken wells, workshops, and sheds for livestock.

The British author and traveler Laurence Oliphant's first impression of the German Colony is most telling:

"Leaving the town by the western gateway, we ride for about a mile parallel to the seashore between cactus hedges, and suddenly find ourselves apparently transported into the heart of Europe. Running straight back from the beach for about half a mile and sloping upward for about a hundred feet in that distance, to the base of the rocky sides of Carmel, runs the village street. On each side of it is a pathway, with a double row of shade-trees, and behind them a series of white stone houses, of one or two stories, generally with tiled roofs, each surrounded with its garden, and each with a text in German engraved over the doorway" (Oliphant, 2001 [1887], pp. 23-24).

When the Ottomans in Palestine were routed in the First World War, the German colonists were regarded as enemy aliens. In fact many of them had been recruited by the Imperial German Army, fighting together with the Ottoman army against the British. Haifa was conquered only after the war ended, so the German colonists of Haifa were not deported to Egypt, as were those of other Templar colonies. At the outbreak of World War II colonists with German citizenship were rounded up by the British and interned, together with Italian and Hungarian enemy aliens, in camps at Waldheim and Bethlehem of

Figure 8: depiction of the German Colony neighborhood in the early 1900 (source: a postcard from the Rimón collection)



Galilee, and later deported to Australia via Egypt.

The German Colony is still an important axis in Haifa, linking the sea on one side with Mount Carmel on the other via the recently restored Bahai Gardens. After many years of inertia, Haifa Municipality began restoration in the late 1990s during the euphoric days following the Oslo Accord, the aim being to attract tourists. The project, funded by the Ministry of Tourism and fuelled by the newly developed Bahai Gardens, consisted mainly of restoring the public infrastructure in the expectation of attracting private investors to continue restoration of the buildings. Following the Palestinian Intifadas and the escalation of terrorist attacks, the almost completed project was about to collapse, but little by little new bars and restaurants have been opened by local Arab investors. It is interesting to note how the former farm buildings and gardens have been transformed into leisure spaces - restaurants and cafes with open terraces suited to the mild Mediterranean climate (Fig. 8).

Today this newly renovated area attracts Arab and Jewish Israelis from all over the country, and has become a major place of leisure for the Palestinians of Haifa and the northern region of Israel. It is a popular destination mainly for

middle-class and educated adults (Jabareen, 2008). A municipal plan to attract a young Jewish clientele to other leisure areas in the city, such as Moriah Avenue along the Carmel ridge, has turned the German Colony into an even more distinctively Arab leisure space. Adjacent to but outside the residential area, it offers anonymity and privacy in a space that is non-existent in other Arab towns (which are mostly small in size and population). In contrast to Arab settlements where the sale of alcohol is usually forbidden, the German Colony has been dubbed "Arab alcohol valley". Although initially the municipality was not too happy about this, economic success is difficult to combat, and the place is now accepted and enjoyed by the city.

Reconstructing the vernacular

Seeking to challenge the municipal declarations about "co-existence", radical Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel have combined their strategies in the struggle over space with more imaginative or visionary counter-discourses about opportunities of

Figure 9: The newly renovated Colony Hotel in the German Colony

Figure 10: Fattous Café in the German Colony



reviving Palestinian urbanity. Reconstruction of the Palestinian city, the centre of their cultural, national and social life which was lost in 1948 is considered as central to reconstruction of Palestinian identity. Contrary to the obliteration of the Palestinian city from the Israeli and Palestinian collective memories, and the representation of Palestinians as rurals, this is a call for the revival of Palestinian urban life. It acknowledges these nationalist sentiments as being closely linked to the pre-Nakba Palestine in which real cities did exist, and Haifa was the largest of them. But that thriving Palestinian city life disappeared in 1948, when the vast majority of Palestinians were either driven out or fled (Morris 1991). Those who stayed struggle to maintain their social, cultural, and economic wellbeing in an atmosphere of discrimination and second-class citizenship.

The first Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in 1988 and the Oslo Accord in 1993 revived the Israeli-Palestinians national identity and gave an edge to their political claims (Kimmerling

and Migdal, 2003). Haifa has regained its position as the centre of Palestinian society. Social and cultural Palestinian institutions and NGOs are opening in the city. The newly renovated German Colony has become a focus of Palestinian leisure life. In a recent analysis of the success of the German Colony for Palestinian users, most approved were its qualities as a place of leisure, as safe, and as providing the privacy that does not exist in other Arab cities. In the context of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Haifa has a good reputation for coexistence between its two ethnic groups, Arabs and Jews. As an example of urban regeneration, the German Colony demonstrates the power of the built form to lend itself to the re-invention of lost traditions. New cultural meanings and new practices contribute to the re-establishment of Palestinian urban life, offering hope and authenticity for ethno-national aspirations, and thus creating a meaningful vernacular for the future.

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